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Interview with Cornel West

Anders Stephanson

Anders Stephanson: Philosophically speaking, you come out of the American tradition of pragmatism. In everyday parlance, pragmatism is often understood as adjusting in an almost opportunistic manner to existing circumstances. Philosophical pragmatism is something quite different.

Cornel West: When philosophers talk about pragmatism, they are talking about Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. For me, it is principally Dewey. Three theses are basic: (1) antirealism in ontology, so that the correspondence theory of truth is called into question and one no longer can appeal to Reality as a court of appeal to adjudicate between conflicting theories of the world; (2) antifoundationalism in epistemology, so that one cannot in fact invoke noninferential, intrinsically credible elements in experience to justify claims about experience; and (3) detranscendentalizing of the subject, the elimination of mind itself as a sphere of inquiry. These three theses (mainly Dewey's) are underpinned by the basic claim that social practices—contingent, power-laden, structured social practices—lie at the very center of knowledge. In other words, knowledge is produced, acquired, and achieved. Here, the link to the marxist tradition, especially that of Antonio Gramsci, looms large for me.

AS: These claims also have similarities with some poststructuralist theory.

CW: Very much so. Detranscendentalizing the subject is, in Derrida's case, of course, a matter of the decentering of the subject, and in that regard his deconstruction clearly converges with Dewey's

three basic theses of long ago. Derrida is more than a skeptical footnote to Husserl, but he can be viewed as that; and when he is, his deconstruction is a problematization of Husserl's quest for certainty within the interior monologue, within the self-presence of consciousness, within the mental theater.

AS: There is obviously no pragmatic agreement on what Derrida at times is erroneously understood to be arguing, the absurd idea that there is nothing outside the text.

CW: He can actually be understood to claim that there is nothing outside social practices: intertextuality is a differential web of relations shot through with traces, shot through with activity. For a pragmatist, that activity is always linked to human agency and the context in which that agency is enacted. If he is read that way, I am in agreement.

AS: Poststructuralism is a critique of marxism insofar as it undermines "the worldliness of the text"; but what also stands out is the attack on totalizing and totality. In the French context, this seems in part an effort to escape from Sartre's shadow, in part a general reaction against the postwar dominance of marxism within the intelligentsia. In the "totalizing heterogeneity" of the United States one might well feel more inclined to retain some notion of totality.

CW: I agree. Without "totality," our politics become emaciated, our politics become dispersed, our politics become nothing but existential rebellion. Some heuristic (rather than ontological) notion of totality is in fact necessary if we are to talk about mediations, interrelations, interdependencies, about totalizing forces in the world. In other words, a measure of synecdochical thinking must be preserved, thinking that would still invoke relations of parts to the whole, as for example the Gramscian articulation of spheres and historical blocs. It is true, on the other hand, that we can no longer hang on to crude orthodox "totalities" such as the idea of superstructure and base.

AS: It is curious that French poststructuralism in a way shares its fixation on language with Habermas, an antagonistic thinker thoroughly mired in "modernity." I find the idea of language as a model for social and political theorizing quite suspect.

CW: Language cannot be a model for social systems, since it is inseparable from other forms of power relations, other forms of social practices. I recognize, as Gadamer does, the radical linguisti-

cality of human existence; I recognize, as Derrida does, the ways in which forms of textualization mediate all our claims about the world; but the linguistic model itself must be questioned. The multilevel operations of power within social practices—of which language is one—are more important.

AS: This is why you describe yourself as a "neo-Gramscian pragmatist."

CW: Gramsci's notion of hegemony is an attempt to keep track of these operative levels of power, so one does not fall into the trap of thinking that class relations somehow can be understood through linguistic models; so one does not fall into the trap of thinking that state repression that scars human bodies can be understood in terms of linguistic models. Power operates very differently in nondiscursive than in discursive ways.

AS: The earlier Foucauldian distinction between discursive and nondiscursive formations remains valid for you then?

CW: He should have held on to it, just as Habermas should have held on to his earlier notion of interaction—a notion rooted in the marxist talk about social relations of production—rather than thinning it out into some impoverished idea of communication. Both can be seen as a move toward linguistic models for power.

AS: Even in the case of Foucault? His pan-power theories are, after all, discursive rather than purely *linguistic*.

CW: True. The later, genealogical Foucault would not make claims on linguistic models, but he remained more interested in power as it relates to the constitution of the subject than in power as such. Now, the structure of identity and subjectivity is important and has often been overlooked by the marxist tradition; but forms of subjec*tion* and subjug*ation* are ultimately quite different from "thick" forms of oppression like economic *exploitation* or state *repression* or bureaucratic *domination*. At any rate, "the conditions for the possibility of the constitution of the subject" is a Kantian question to which there is no satisfactory answer. To answer it, as Heidegger said in his self-critique, is to extend the metaphysical impulse in the name of an attack on metaphysics. From that viewpoint, Foucault's notion of anonymous and autonomous discourses is but one in a series of attempts going back to Kant's transcendental subjects and Hegel's transindividual world spirits.

AS: What if Foucault would have said that he recognized the existence of other types of oppression but that his field of analysis was simply different?

CW: I would have replied: "Fine, but that sounds more like the language of an academic than a political intellectual." It would have been to fall into the same traps of disciplinary division of labor he was calling into question. If, in fact, one is writing texts that are strategic and tactical in relation to present struggles, then it is difficult for me to see how one can be counterhegemonic without actually including "thick" forms.

AS: At any rate, the poststructuralist problematic seems now to have been engulfed by the general debate on postmodernism. A certain confusion of terminology marks this debate. Conceptual pairs like modernity/postmodernity and modernism/postmodernism mean very different things depending on country and cultural practice.

CW: Three things are crucial in clearing that up: historical periodization, demarcation of cultural archives and practices, and politics/ideology. Take history and demarcation for example. It is clear that "modern" philosophy begins in the seventeenth century, well before the Enlightenment, with the turn toward the subject and the new authority, the institutionalization, of scientific reason. What we call postmodern philosophy today is precisely about questioning the foundational authority of science. This trajectory is very different from that of modern*ist* literary practices, which in turn is quite different from that of architecture: the former, to simplify, attacks reason in the name of myth, whereas the latter valorizes it together with technique and form. These problems of periodization and demarcation are often ignored. For instance, Portoghesi's work on postmodern architecture seems to assume that his historical framework is an uncontroversial given.

AS: In this sense, Lyotard's initial theorization of the postmodern condition is profoundly marked by its French provenance.

CW: Yes. His book, in many ways an overcelebrated one, is really a French reflection on the transgressions of *modernism* that has little to do with *postmodernism* in the American context. In France, modernism still appears to be the *centering* phenomenon. Figures like Mallarmé, Artaud, Joyce, and Bataille continue to play a fundamental role. In the United States, as Andreas Huyssen has emphasized, post-

modernism is an avant-garde—like rebellion against the modernism of the museum, against the modernism of the literary and academic establishment. Note, too, the disjunction here between cultural postmodernism and postmodern politics. For Americans are politically always already in a condition of postmodern fragmentation and heterogeneity in a way that Europeans have not been; and the revolt against the center by those constituted as marginals is an *oppositional* difference in a way that poststructuralist notions of difference are not. These American attacks on universality in the name of difference, these "postmodern" issues of Otherness (Afro-Americans, Native Americans, women, gays) are in fact an implicit critique of certain French postmodern discourses about Otherness that really serve to hide and conceal the power of the voices and movements of Others.

AS: From an American viewpont, the debate between Lyotard and Habermas is thus rather off-the-mark.

CW: Interesting *philosophical* things are at stake there, but the politics is a family affair, a very narrow family affair at that. Habermas stands for the grand old tradition of the Enlightenment project of *Vernunft*. I have some affinities with that tradition, but there is nothing new about what he has to say. Lyotard's attack on Habermas comes out of a valorization of the transgression of modernism vis-à-vis an old highbrow, Enlightenment perspective. All this is very distant from the kind of debates about postmodernism we have in the States, though of course one has to read it, be acquainted with it.

AS: Agreed, but the debate has not been without effect here either. For instance, it is now often felt necessary in architectural discussions to make references to Lyotard.

CW: It has become fashionable to do so because he is now a major figure, but I am talking about *serious* readings of him. Anyone who knows anything about Kant and Wittgenstein also knows that Lyotard's readings of them are very questionable and wrenched out of context. When these readings then travel to the United States, they often assume an authority that remains *uninterrogated*.

AS: A case in point is the concept of "life-world," now freely bandied about and most immediately originating in Husserl. In the later Habermas it fulfills an important function as the site of colonization for the "systems-world." This, roughly, seems to combine Weber

with Husserl, but the result is in fact nothing so much as classic American sociology.

CW: When Habermas juxtaposes the life-world with the colonizing systems, it strikes me as a rather clumsy Parsonian way of thinking about the incorporation of culture into advanced capitalist cycles of production and consumption. On the one hand, Habermas has in mind the fundamental role that culture has come to play, now that the commodification process has penetrated cultural practices which were previously relatively autonomous; on the other hand, he is thinking of how oppositional forces and resistance to the system (what I call the process of commodification) are on the wane. This is simply a less effective way of talking about something that marxists have been talking about for years.

AS: Yet, it is obvious that both Lyotard and Habermas must have done something to fill a kind of lack somewhere: otherwise their reception here would be inexplicable.

CW: True. These remarks do not explain why Habermas and Lyotard have gained the attention they have. Habermas, of course, speaks with the status of a second-generation Frankfurt School theorist; and he has become such a celebrity that he can drop a number of terms from a number of different traditions and they take on a salience they often do not deserve. More fundamentally, his encyclopedic knowledge and his obsession with the philosophical foundations of democratic norms also satisfy a pervasive need for left-academic intellectuals—a need for the professional respectability and rigor that displace political engagement and this-worldly involvement. At the same time, his well-known, but really tenuous, relation to marxism provides them with an innocuous badge of radicalism. All of this takes place at the expense of an encounter with the marxist tradition, especially with Gramsci and the later Lukács of the Ontology works. In this sense, Habermas unwittingly serves as a kind of opium for some of the American left-academic intelligentsia. The impact of Lyotard, on the other hand, is probably the result of the fact that he was the first serious European thinker to address the important question of postmodernism in a comprehensive way. Deleuze, to take a related philosopher, never did; though he is ultimately a more profound poststructuralist who should get more attention than he does in the United States. His early book on Nietzsche is actually an originary text.

AS: Why?

CW: Because Deleuze was the first to think through the notion of difference independent of Hegelian ideas of opposition, and that was the start of the radical anti-Hegelianism which has characterized French intellectual life in the last decades. This position—the trashing of totality, the trashing of mediation, the valorization of difference outside the subject-object opposition, the decentering of the subject—all these features we now associate with postmodernism and poststructuralism go back to Deleuze's resurrection of Nietzsche against Hegel. Foucault, already assuming this Deleuzian critique, was the first important French intellectual who could *circumvent*, rather than confront, Hegel, which is why he says that we live in a "Deleuzian age." To live in a Deleuzian age is to live in an anti-Hegelian age so that one does not have to come to terms with Lukács, Adorno or any other Hegelian marxists.

AS: Nietzsche's ascendancy was not without maleficent effects when French theory was imported into the United States.

CW: It was unfortunate for American intellectual life, because we never had the marxist culture against which the French were reacting. Nor was it a culture that took Hegel seriously: the early John Dewey was the only left Hegelian we ever had. Nietzsche was received, therefore, in the context of analytic philosophy, and you can imagine the gaps and hiatuses, the blindness that resulted when Nietzsche entered narrow Anglo-American positivism. In literary criticism, on the other hand, Nietzsche was part of the Derridean baggage that the "New Critics" were able easily (and often uncritically) to assimilate into their close readings. As a result, we now have a "Tower of Babel" in American literary criticism.

AS: The current, however, does not run in only one direction. Is the present French interest in "postanalytic" philosophy an indication that intellectual life is being reorientated toward the United States, at least in terms of objects of inquiry?

CW: No doubt. French society has clearly come under the influence of Americanization, and West Germany, always somewhat of a fifty-first state, has moved in this direction as well. More immediately, now that the university systems in Europe no longer have the status or financial support they once had, American universities are pulling in the European intellectuals, offering money and celebrity status but also a fairly high level of conversation.

AS: Features of what we associate with the concept of postmodernism have been part of American life for a long time: fragmentation, heterogeneity, surfaces without history. Is postmodernism in some sense really the codification of life in Los Angeles?

CW: Only in one form and specifically at the level of middlebrow culture. The other side is the potentially oppositional aspect of the notion. Postmodernism ought never to be viewed as a homogeneous phenomenon, but rather as one in which political contestation is central. Even if we look at it principally as a form of Americanization of the world, it is clear that within the US there are various forms of ideological and political conflict going on.

AS: The black community, for example is more "contestational" than average America.

CW: The black political constituency still has some sense of the reality of the world, some sense of what is going on in the third world. Look at the issues Jesse Jackson pressed in 1984 and now in 1988, and you find that they were issues normally reserved for the salons of leftist intellectuals. Bringing that on television had a great impact.

AS: Yet, the black American condition, so to speak, is not an uplifting sight at the moment.

CW: Not at all. There is increasing class division and differentiation, creating on the one hand a significant black middle class, highly anxiety-ridden, insecure, willing to be co-opted and incorporated into the powers that be, concerned with racism to the degree that it poses constraints on upward social mobility; and, on the other, a vast and growing black underclass, an underclass that embodies a kind of *walking nihilism* of pervasive drug addiction, pervasive alcoholism, pervasive homocide, and an exponential rise in suicide. Now, because of the deindustrialization, we also have a devastated black industrial working class. We are talking here about tremendous hopelessness.

AS: Suicide has increased enormously?

CW: It has increased six times in the last decades for black males like myself who are between eighteen and thirty-five. This is unprecedented. Afro-Americans have always killed themselves less than other Americans, but this is no longer true.

AS: What does a black oppositional intellectual do in these generally dire circumstances?

CW: One falls back on those black institutions that have attempted to serve as resources for sustenance and survival, the black churches being one such institution, especially their progressive and prophetic wing. One tries to root oneself organically in these institutions so that one can speak to a black constituency, while maintaining a conversation with the most engaging political and postmodernist debates on the outside so that the insights they provide can be brought in.

AS: That explains why you are, among other things, a kind of lay preacher. It does not explain why you are a Christian.

CW: My own left Christianity is not simply instrumentalist. It is in part a response to those dimensions of life that have been flattened out, to the surfacelike character of a postmodern culture that refuses to speak to issues of despair, that refuses to speak to issues of the absurd. To that extent I still find Christian narratives and stories *empowering and enabling*.

AS: What does it mean to a black American to hear that, in Baudrillard's language, we are in a simulated space of hyperreality, that we have lost the real?

CW: I read that symptomatically. Baudrillard seems to be articulating a sense of what it is to be a French, middle-class intellectual, or perhaps what it is to be middle class generally. Let me put it in terms of a formulation from Henry James that Fredric Jameson has appropriated: there is a reality *that one cannot not know*. The ragged edges of the Real, of *Necessity*, not being able to eat, not having shelter, not having health care, all this is something that one cannot not know. The black condition acknowledges that. It is so much more acutely felt because this is a society where a lot of people live a Teflon existence, where a lot of people have no sense of the ragged edges of necessity, of what it means to be impinged upon by structures of oppression. To be an an upper-middle-class American is actually to live a life of unimaginable comfort, convenience, and luxury. Half of the black population is denied this, which is why they have a strong sense of reality.

AS: Does that make notions of postmodernism meaningless from a black perspective?

CW: It must be conceived very differently at least. Take Ishmael Reed, an exemplary postmodern writer. Despite his conservative politics, he cannot deny the black acknowledgment of the reality one

cannot not know. In writing about black American history, for instance, he has to come to terms with the state-sponsored terrorism of lynching blacks and so on. This is inescapable in black postmodernist practices.

AS: How is one in fact to understand black postmodernist practices?

CW: To talk about black postmodernist practices is to go back to bebop music and see how it relates to literary expressions like Reed's and Charles Wright's. It is to go back, in other words, to the genius of Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, and Miles Davis. Bebop was, after all, a revolt against the middle-class "jazz of the museum," against swing and white musicians like Benny Goodman, who had become hegemonic by colonizing a black art form. What Parker did, of course, was to Africanize jazz radically: to accent the polyrhythms, to combine these rhythms with unprecedented virtuosity on the sax. He said explicitly that his music was not produced to be accepted by white Americans. He would be suspicious if it were. This sense of revolt was to be part and parcel of the postmodern rebellion against the modernism of the museum.

AS: To me, bebop seems like a black cultural avant-garde that corresponds historically to abstract expressionism in painting—the last gasp of modernism—on which indeed it had some considerable influence.

CW: Certainly they emerge together, and people do tend to parallel them as though they were the same; but abstract expressionism was not a revolt in the way bebop was. In fact, it was an instance of modernism itself. Bebop also had much to do with fragmentation, with heterogeneity, with the articulation of difference and marginality, aspects of what we associate with postmodernism today.

AS: Aspects of the cultural dominant, yes; but these elements are also part of modernism. Surely one can still talk about Charlie Parker as a unified subject expressing inner *angst* or whatever, an archetypal characteristic of modernism.

CW: True, but think too of another basic feature of postmodernism, the breakdown of highbrow and pop culture. Parker would use whistling off the streets of common black life: "Cherokee," for instance, was actually a song that black children used to sing when jumping rope or, as I did, playing marbles. Parker took that melody of the black masses and filtered it through his polyrhythms and tech-

nical virtuosity, turning it into a highbrow jazz feature that was not quite highbrow anymore. He was already calling into question the distinction between high and low culture, pulling from a bricolage, as it were, what was seemingly popular and relating it to what was then high. Yet, I would not deny the modernist impulse, nor would I deny that they were resisting jazz as commodity, very much like Joyce and Kafka resisted literary production as commodity. In that sense bebop straddles the fence.

AS: The ultimate problem, however, is whether it is actually useful to talk about someone like Charlie Parker in these terms.

CW: It is useful to the degree that it contests the prevailing image of him as a modernist. As you imply, on the other hand, there is a much deeper as to question whether these terms *modernism/postmodernism* relate to Afro-American cultural practices in any illuminating way at all. We are only at the beginning of that inquiry.

AS: Was there ever actually a mass black audience for bebop?

CW: Yes, Parker's was the sort of music black people danced to in the 1940s. Miles's "cool" stage was also big in the 1950s with albums like "Kinda Blue," though it went hand in hand with the popularity of Nat King Cole and Dinah Washington.

AS: What happened to this avant-garde black music when Motown and Aretha Franklin came along?

CW: It was made a fetish for the educated middle class, principally, but not solely, the white middle class. In absolute terms, its domain actually expanded because the black audience of middle-class origin also expanded. But the great dilemma of black musicians who try to preserve a tradition from mainstream domestication and dilution is in fact that they lose contact with the black masses. In this case, there was eventually a move toward "fusion," jazz artists attempting to produce objects intended for broader black-and-white consumption.

AS: Miles Davis is the central figure of that avant-garde story.

CW: And he crossed over with the seminal record *Bitches Brew* in 1970, accenting his jazz origins while borrowing from James Brown's polyrhythms and Sly Stone's syncopation. *Bitches Brew* brought him a black mass audience that he had lost in the 1960s—certainly one that Coltrane had lost completely.

AS: Crossover artists, in the sense of having a racially mixed mass audience, are not very numerous today.

CW: No, but there are more than ever: Whitney Houston, Dionne Warwick, Lionel Richie, Diana Ross, and Anita Baker. Baker is a very different crossover artist because she is still deeply rooted in the black context. Michael Jackson and Prince are crossover in another sense: their music is less rooted in black musical traditions and much more open to white rock and so forth.

AS: In Prince's case it has to do with the fact that he is not entirely from a black background.

CW: Still, he grew up in a black foster home and a black Seventh Day Adventist church, but in Minneapolis, which is very different from growing up like Michael Jackson in a black part of Gary, Indiana. Minneapolis has always been a place of cultural cross-fertilization, of interracial marriages and relationships. The early Jackson Five, on the other hand, were thoroughly ensconsed in a black tradition, and Michael began his career dancing like James Brown. Now, he is at the center of the black-white interface.

AS: Prince never really played "black" music as one thinks of it. His music is "fused" from the start.

CW: To be in a black context in Minneapolis is already to be in a situation of fusion, because the blacks themselves have much broader access to mainstream white culture in general. You get the same thing with other black stars who have come out of that place.

AS: Michael Jackson, by contrast, is now a packaged middle-American product.

CW: A nonoppositional instance of commodification in black skin that is becoming more and more like candy, more radical than McDonald's, but not by much. It is watered-down black music, but still with a lot of the aggressiveness and power of that tradition.

AS: Music is *the* black means of cultural expression, is it not?

CW: Music and preaching. Here, rap is unique because it combines the black preacher and the black music tradition, replacing the liturgical-ecclesiastical setting with the African polyrhythms of the street. A tremendous *articulateness* is syncopated with the African drumbeat, the African funk, into an American postmodernist product: there is no subject expressing originary anguish here but a fragmented subject, pulling from past and present, innovatively producing a heterogeneous product. The stylistic combination of the oral, the literate, and the musical is exemplary as well. Otherwise, it is part and parcel of the subversive energies of black underclass youth,

energies that are forced to take a cultural mode of articulation because of the political lethargy of American society. The music of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Kurtis Blow, and Sugar Hill Gang has to take on a deeply political character because, again, they are in the reality that the black underclass *cannot not know*: the brutal side of American capital, the brutal side of American racism, the brutal side of sexism against black women.

AS: I always thought rap was too indigenous a black form of expression to make it in the general marketplace. Run/DMC has proven me wrong on this.

CW: Indeed. Run/DMC is as indigenous as you can get. Upper-middle-class white students at Yale consume a lot of Run/DMC.

AS: Yet, the constitutive elements of rap seemed to me too fixed for it to become a permanent presence on the crossover scene: more anonymous and less easily assimilated into existing white concepts of melody and structure. This, too, is probably wrong.

CW: People said the same thing about Motown in 1961, the same thing about Aretha Franklin, who is about as organic as you can get. She is not as accepted by mainstream white society as the smoother and more diluted Warwick and Ross, but she *is* accepted. That, from the perspective of 1964-65, is unbelievable. The same thing could happen with rap music, since the boundaries are actually rather fluid. But it won't remain the same.

AS: Where will rap end up?

CW: Where most American postmodern products end up: highly packaged, regulated, distributed, circulated, and consumed.

AS: Preaching, as you said, is obviously a cultural form of expression; but is it a specifically *artistic* form?

CW: Sure. The best preachers are outstanding oral artists, performance artists. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave white America just a small taste of what it is to be an artistic rhetorician in the black churches. Tremendous gravity and weight are given to these artistic performances because people's *lives* hang on them. They provide some hope from week to week so that these folk won't fall into hopelessness and meaninglessness, so that they won't kill themselves. The responsibility of the black preacher-artist is, in that sense, deeply functional, but at the same time it entails *a refinement of a form* bequeathed to him by those who came before. Black preaching is inseparable here from black singing. Most secular black singers

come out of the choir, and the lives of the congregation hang on how they sing the song, what they put into the song, how passionate, how self-invested they are. Preaching is just less visible to the outside as an art form because words uttered once don't have the same status as cultural products; but the black preachers are artists with a very long tradition.

AS: Since it does not lend itself to mechanical reproduction, preaching is also hard to destroy by turning it into a business. How is this artistic form of expression actually evaluated?

CW: In terms of the impact the preacher has on the congregation. This impact can take the form of cantankerous response, or the form of existential empowerment, the convincing of people to keep on keeping on, to keep on struggling, contesting, and resisting.

AS: It is Kant's acrobat who intervenes constantly to transform an otherwise unstable equilibrium into another equilibrium.

CW: Well put. Black sermonic practices have not received the attention they deserve. As a matter of fact, black linguistic practices as such need to be examined better because they add a lot to the American language.

AS: Black language creates a wealth of new words, which are then quickly picked up by the mainstream.

CW: Usually with significant semantic changes. Stevie Wonder's "Everything is alright, uptight, out of sight" is a string of synonyms. *Uptight*, when I was growing up, meant smooth, cool, everything is fine. By the time it got to middle America, *uptight* meant anxiety-ridden, the inability of everything to be fine. Similar semantic shifts, though perhaps less drastic, take place with *chilling out*, *mellowing out*, and other black expressions. *Chilling out* meant letting things be, a sort of Heideggerian notion of *aletheia*, letting the truth reveal itself, letting it shine, letting it come forth.

AS: Given the social circumstances of which it is a product, black American language seems to me, on the outside, not to allow very easily for prevalent white orders of theoretical reflection.

CW: It is a hustling culture, and a hustling culture tends to be *radically* "practicalist," deeply pragmatic, because the issue is always one of surviving, getting over.

AS: This, I imagine, demands some sharp linguistic twists for you.

CW: I am continually caught in a kind of "heteroglossia," speaking a number of English languages in radically different contexts. When

it comes to abstract theoretical reflection, I employ Marx, Weber, Frankfurt theorists, Foucault, and so on. When it comes to speaking with the black masses, I use Christian narratives and stories, a language meaningful to them but filtered through and informed by intellectual developments from de Tocqueville to Derrida. When it comes to the academy itself there is yet another kind of language, abstract but often atheoretical, since social theorizing is mostly shunned. Philosophers are simply ill-equipped to to talk about social theory: they know Wittgenstein but not Weber, they know J. L. Austin but not Marx.

AS: Apart from the musician and the preacher, black culture exhibits a third artist of great importance: the athlete. There is enormous emphasis on aesthetic execution in black sports.

CW: You can see this in basketball, where the black player tries to *style* reality so that he becomes spectacle and performance, always projecting a sense of self; whereas his white counterpart tends toward the productivistic and mechanistic. A lot of time, energy, and discipline also go into it but usually with a certain *investment of self* that does not express the work ethic alone. Ali was, of course, exemplary in this respect. Not only was he a great boxer, but a stylish one as well: smooth, clever, rhythmic, syncopated.

AS: Whence comes this emphasis on spectacle?

CW: Originally, it derives from an African sense of pageantry, the tendency to project yourself *in performance* in a way so that you are at one with a certain flow of things. By "one," I do not mean any romantic kind of unity between subject and object or pantheistic unification with nature, but at one with the craft and task at hand. It is also to risk something. Baraka has spoken of the African *deification of accident*, by which he indicated the acknowledgment of risk and contingency: to be able to walk a tightrope, to be able to do the dangerous, and to do it well. But it is a form of risk-ridden execution that is *self-imposed*.

AS: Among the various black modes of cultural expression, pictorial art has not, with all due allowances for graffiti art, been much in evidence. The black middle class seems uninterested and so does the underclass: art as a practice is esoteric and largely without rewards.

CW: Access to the kinds of education and subcultural circles is much less available to potential black artists. In addition to the racism

in the avant-garde world, painting and sculpture are not as widely appreciated as they ought to be in black America. Therefore, pictorial black artists are marginal. They deserve more black support—and exposure.

AS: Beyond impediments of entry, is there not also some indigenous cultural element at work here? There are, after all, many black writers and dancers.

CW: The strong, puritanical Protestantism of black religion has not been conducive to the production of pictures. For the same reason, there is a great belief in the *power of the word*, in literate acumen. In fact, writers are sometimes given too much status and become "spokespeople" for the race, which is ridiculous. Yet, there is an openness, diversity, multiplicity of artistic sensibility when developed and cultivated in the black community. Realist modes of representation are, for example, not inherently linked to Afro-American culture. The pioneering artwork of Howardina Pindell, Emma Amos, Benny Andrews, and Martin Puryear are exemplary in this regard.

AS: It is a cliché to say that we live in a society of images, but we obviously do. Blacks watch more television than the average. Do they appropriate these images differently?

CW: There is an element of scrutiny involved. The images have been so pervasively negative, so degrading, and devaluing of black people—especially of black women—that the process has always been one tied to some skepticism and suspicion.

AS: Images are seen through a skeptical racial grid?

CW: A racial grid as transmitted from one generation to the next. This does not mean it is always critical. Think, for example, of all the Italian pictures of Jesus that hang in black churches at this very moment, pictures of Michelangelo's uncles when the man was actually a dark Palestinian Jew. Such images are widely accepted. But that particular one is, of course, different because it is sacred and therefore much more difficult to question. There is a much more critical attitude towards television. With the exception of the new phenomenon of the Cosby Show and Frank's Place, black folk are still usually depicted there as buffoons, black women as silly.

AS: Images of blacks are sometimes produced by blacks, as in many music videos. Those I have watched tend to be either sentimental ones about people yearning for the "right one" or highly charged ones featuring minutely choreographed movement.

CW: You also find a lot of conspicuous consumption: a lot of *very* expensive cars, and furs, and suits, and so forth. The American dream of wealth and prosperity remains a powerful carrot, because television producers are aware of the reality that the black audience cannot not know. Another big problem is the relation between black men and women. Different kinds of women are projected as objects of desire and quest, but they are downright white women, or blacks who look entirely white, or very light-skinned black women. Rarely do you find any longing for the really *dark* woman. And when a black woman is the star, she is usually yearning for a black man who is light—never a white man, but a black man who is light.

AS: Black culture is, of course, as sexist as the rest.

CW: In a different way. The pressure on Afro-Americans as a people has forced the black man closer to the black woman: they are in the same boat. But they are also at each other's throat. The relation is internally hierarchical and often mediated by violence: black men over black women.

AS: Is it not more unabashedly sexist in its macho version? For even though popular culture as such is deeply infused with macho imagery, it seems to me that the black ditto is more *overtly* so.

CW: Black society shows the typical range from the extreme machismo of any patriarchy to a few egalitarian relations. Nonetheless, what you say is probably true, and there are simply no excuses for the vicious treatment of black women by these men. Yet, interaction between the sexes in the black community is unintelligible without highlighting the racist and poverty-ridden circumstances under which so many blacks live. Machismo is itself a bid for power by relatively powerless and degraded black men. Remember, too, that the white perception here is principally informed by interracial relations between black men and white women, relations in which black machismo is particularly pronounced. There is also an *expectation* among large numbers of white folk that black men be macho, and black men then tend to fulfill that expectation. Those who do not are perceived as abnormal. A crucial part of this phenomenon is the question of sexual prowess: if you're not a "gashman," your whole identity as a black male becomes highly problematic. So, to a degree, the process is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

AS: There has been an extreme destruction of the family within the black underclass. Aside from the obvious causes, why is this?

CW: Aside from the changes in society as a whole, developments like hedonistic consumerism and the constant need of stimulation of the body, which make any qualitative human relationships hard to maintain, it is a question of a breakdown in cultural resources, what Raymond Williams calls structures of meaning. Except for the church, there is no longer any potent tradition on which one can fall back in dealing with hopelessness and meaninglessness. There used to be a set of stories that could convince people that their absurd situation was one worth coping with, but the passivity is now overwhelming. Drug addiction is only one manifestation of this: to live a life of living death, of slower death, rather than killing yourself immediately. I recently spoke at a high school in one of the worst parts of Brooklyn, and the figures were staggering: almost 30 percent had attempted suicide, 70 percent were deeply linked to drugs. This is what I mean by "walking nihilism." *It is the imposing of closure on the human organism, intentionally, by that organism itself.* Such nihilism is not *cute*. We are not dancing on Nietzsche's texts here and *talking* about nihilism; we are in a nihilism that is *lived*. We are talking about real obstacles to the sustaining of a *people*.

AS: Which is not quite how Nietzschean nihilism is normally conceived.

CW: There are a variety of nihilisms in Nietzsche, and this is not so much one in which meaning is elusive, certainly not one with a surplus of meaning. What we have, on the contrary, is not at all elusive: meaninglessness, a meaningless so well understood that it can result in the taking of one's own life.